

Credibility Gaps

By Laurence Stern

Washington Post National Editor

—Nov. 1, 1967

QUESTION: Mr. President, Sir, one of the main points in the domestic arguments about the policy of the war has been the fact that in 1964 when you were campaigning you spoke of not wishing to send American boys to fight a war that Asian boys should fight. Then a year later, the Government did that. I wonder if you could give us your thinking on the change in policy?

PRESIDENT JOHNSON: There has not been a change of policy . . . —Nov. 1, 1967

THOSE TWO little words—Credibility Gap—were born as a journalistic flippancy and may be remembered in history as a political epitaph. When first coined, the term applied to the disparity between what was happening in Vietnam and what was being said about it in Washington. The baptism of Credibility Gap occurred late in 1965 when a major escalation of American military power was in progress in Southeast Asia and the line at the State Department, Pentagon and White House was that nothing had changed.

It has since been applied to budget figures, to the war on poverty, to the war on waste and to departure times for Texas and other points. Even President Johnson has been moved to speak with bittersweet jocularity of "mah incredibility."

The discovery of the Gap was accompanied by a great public clamor. Columnists, television commentators, in one case former United Nations Ambassador Arthur Goldberg, pointed to it with varying degrees of awe and disapproval. It was as though the Gap had suddenly ended a golden era of public candor in which Government officials never lied to reporters.

But of course while the term is of recent origin, the practice is as old as the hills, as firmly embedded in American political behavior as is the continental fault in American geology. And one of the virtues of this very solid and useful book is that while it documents instances of incredibility in the Johnson Administration, it also puts them into historical perspective.

Even after his Farewell Address, George Washington was accused in the Republican press of having "debauched" and "deceived" the Nation. Thomas Jefferson coddled

Book Review

'Anything But the Truth'

By William McGaffin and Ervin Knoll (Putnam, 250 pp., \$5.95).

favorites—most notably the National Intelligencer, a newspaper established at his invitation—and railed at the "thousands of calumnies" he found in other journals. Andrew Jackson had a quaint, and effective credibility insurance policy with the Washington Globe, for which he decreed editorial policy and to which he provided \$50,000 a year in Government printing contracts. Lyndon Johnson has 6800 public relations men scattered through the Federal bureaucracy whose job it is to explain and defend the Administration's good works at a cost of \$425 million annually.

The astonishing thing is that Credibility Gap exists despite this army of official explainers and the ability of the White House to dominate the major news media, almost at will. Knoll and McGaffin, in any event, survey the Gap from the vantage point of two discerning and hard-working newspapermen on a case-by-case basis. One of the most fascinating entries is a chapter on the slick, high pressure merchandising apparatus of the Office of Economic Opportunity. It is a dismaying picture, as presented in the book, of ballyhoo dominating substance, of claims and promises beyond the capacity of any existing Federal program to achieve.

While the descriptive reporting is the strongest feature of Anything But the Truth, the book is weakest in addressing the question of how to close Credibility Gap. There is a resounding coda on the Need for a Responsible Press, Etc., but the book presents no viable way either to stop the Government from dissembling or to stop people from disbelieving it.

There is really only one way to close the Credibility Gap and I do not advance it as a practical solution. That is to win universal acceptance in the Federal establishment, from the President down to the lowliest \$14,000-a-year public information man, that lying is naughty.

© 1968, The Washington Post Co.

How would this be for poster